

OBITUARY

Jan Van Bragt (1928–2007)

Basing himself at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Jan Van Bragt spent many years promoting religious and cultural exchange between the East and West. On April 12, 2007, he passed away at a hospital in Himeji near the headquarters of his religious congregation due to lung cancer. He was seventy-eight. Van Bragt contributed many times to this journal, and his connection with it was quite close. As a tribute to him, I would like to say a few words here about his accomplishments and what kind of person he was.

Van Bragt was born in 1928 in the city of Sint-Antonius-Brecht in Flemish Belgium. In 1946, he entered the national missionary order of Belgium, the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (commonly known as the Scheutists or in Japan as the Junshinkai 淳心会), and was ordained a priest in 1952. He received his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Leuven in 1957, and after teaching philosophy at his order's seminary, came to Japan in 1961.

In 1965, Van Bragt entered the graduate school of Kyoto University as a research student and studied there under Takeuchi Yoshinori and Nishitani Keiji for the next six years. From that time on, he would continue to be influenced by these teachers for the rest of his life. He became the provincial superior of the Congregation in Japan in 1971, and after serving there for five years, relocated to Nagoya in 1976 in response to an invitation by the newly established Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. During the next fifteen years until 1991, acting as director there, he succeeded in developing the Institute into a center of religious studies which serves as an invaluable link between international and Japanese scholars. After retiring from Nanzan University, he moved to Kyoto, where he continued his focus on research, writing, and promoting interreligious dialogue. During that time, he was invited to universities in Canada, Belgium, the United States, and the Philippines to lecture on interreligious dialogue. In addition, from 1985 to 1990 he served as a member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

One of Van Bragt's greatest accomplishments was his contribution to deepening the discourse between Christianity and Buddhism. He was a key member of the Japan Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, founded in 1982. At

meetings of the Society in Japan and various countries, he made the experience valuable for all by skillfully leading the discussions with his deftness in Japanese, Flemish, German, French, and English.

It should be pointed out that Van Bragt did not only initiate East-West inter-religious dialogue and interaction; he made it into a truly creative act. This is no doubt largely due to his deep interest in and understanding of Buddhism. He was greatly impressed with the religious heart or “religious reality” that appears in Buddhism. He completed his translation of Nishitani Keiji’s *Religion and Nothingness* after working on it for many years. He continued to work on a number of translation projects until just before his death, including Soga Ryōjin’s “The Core of Shinshū” and many others. His translations and writings could be seen as stemming from his desire to contact the core reality of Buddhism himself—they were not written only with the intention of expressing the religious reality of Buddhism to the West.

One of the things that left a lasting impression on Van Bragt when he came to Japan was the Buddhist tradition that underlies Japanese culture. He was impressed by this religious reality because he believed that a comparable religious reality also ran through Christianity. However, it surprised him that in terms of doctrinal theology, Christianity and Buddhism took forms that seemed incompatible with each other. He was puzzled as to why two religions that are so similar in regard to their religious reality came to be expressed in ways that made them incompatible. This was his personal *kōan*, as it were, fueling his desire to pursue interreligious dialogue.

His question, if put in more concrete terms, is how emptiness—a central teaching of Mahayana—can coexist with the essential religious values of love and compassion. Put more simply, he asked how compassion could arise out of the philosophy of emptiness. It is unclear whether he was able to answer this question satisfactorily for himself. However, the fact that he completed his English translation of *Religion and Nothingness* after working on it intensively for sixteen years testifies to the great efforts he made to grasp the question of emptiness and come to a resolution. However, it seems that the conclusion he drew as a result of these efforts was a somewhat negative one. He believed that while wisdom could emerge from emptiness, love could not—this was the conclusion that he could not help but draw. And if this is the case, he felt it unreasonable—even a misrepresentation—for experts on Japanese Buddhism to seek to explain the whole movement of Mahayana in terms of the ideology of emptiness.

From this conclusion, he drew what could be called a basic framework for

engaging in interreligious dialogue. His perspective was that the decisive differences we see among religions are the result of the theologians of those religions not dealing earnestly with their own religious reality and not expressing that reality in adequate terms. That is, the differences we see among religions are the result of distortions caused by theological expressions. By carrying out interreligious dialogue, this is the problem he sought to examine and verify.

But what does this mean? Interreligious dialogue is not about mutual understanding or mutual criticism; it is a platform to critically examine whether the reality of one's religion is being accurately expressed by the logic and concepts of one's theology. If judged insufficient or unsuitable, one should gladly be willing to omit certain ideas or change their expression. This was the bold idea that Van Bragt used as his central framework for engaging in interreligious dialogue.

Such distortions must be exposed and investigated by both parties involved in the dialogue. Taking up Christianity, we can admit that such distortions are present. They are the result of Christianity's use of Greek philosophy for expressing its religious reality. The concept of being that the Christian theologians borrowed from Greek ontology is not able to fully encompass the reality of love, which is a fundamental part of Christianity. The Greek concept of being is insufficient in describing religious realities—such as the will, hope, and faith—that have a limitless nature. This is a fundamental weakness in Christian theology. And in this sense, the concept of being upon which medieval Christian theology was built acted as a shackle. Van Bragt felt that rather than expressing the spirit of Christianity accurately, it actually betrayed it.

He directed the same critique towards Buddhism. Although Mahayana Buddhism was founded on a deep reappraisal of the actual contents of Śākyamuni's enlightenment—his inner awakening—this reappraisal took the form of the ideology of emptiness. However, he was skeptical whether the Mahayana concept of emptiness actually served to accurately and fully portray the religious reality present in Śākyamuni's self-awakening. He felt that even if emptiness helped to shed light on the aspect of wisdom present in the reality of Mahayana, it was turning a blind eye to that other important aspect of compassion. He postulated that the distortion and damage done to Christianity by the concept of being was comparable to the effect the concept of emptiness had on Buddhism. We have to be careful to point out that this critique was not directed towards Buddhism itself, but towards its interpreters.

It was at this point that Van Bragt's critique turned to another member of the Mahayana school—Shin Buddhism. Shin Buddhism succeeded in shed-

ding light on the aspect of compassion, which was not fully developed in the Mahayana reappraisal of the content of Śākyamuni's awakening, and sought to raise this aspect as a source of deeper inspiration. Shin Buddhism expressed this as awakening to the Vow of the Tathāgata Amitābha and described this characteristic stage of awakening as the pinnacle of Mahayana Buddhism. Immersing himself in the writings of Soga Ryōjin, Van Bragt came into contact with this core source of inspiration for Shin Buddhism. He had a deep respect for Soga's efforts as a scholar in trying to formulate an appropriate concept to express this inspiration. Interpreters of Shin Buddhism must give this inspiration an accurate conceptual expression in a way that is faithful to this experience. That is why Van Bragt continued to translate the writings of Soga throughout his life.

However, what dismayed him was that many interpreters and scholars of Shin Buddhism interpreted the inspiration that is at the core of Shin Buddhism in terms of the concept of emptiness, in effect distilling the power of this teaching by conflating it with emptiness. He saw the low place allotted for desire in Shin Buddhism as proof of this trend. Faith, which is central in Shin Buddhism, is something that ultimately leads to realizing nirvana. Therefore it is congruent with emptiness at its most fundamental level. However, if faith is not given energy by desire, it cannot become a real force in people's lives. Yet Shin Buddhist scholarship failed to fully recognize this fact. By being quick to equate desire with mental affliction, it satisfied itself with a heavy-handed negation of all desire. Van Bragt saw this as the result of placing too much emphasis on the concept of emptiness. He criticized the interpreters of Shin Buddhism for departing from their religious reality and thus failing to grasp the unique gestalt of Shin Buddhism.

Some may remark that he was overstepping his bounds when making this assessment, stating that an outsider has no grounds in denouncing Shin Buddhist scholarship for not grasping the Shin Buddhist gestalt. However, his evaluation was not out of line. That is because the aim of interreligious dialogue is not to reach a mutual consensus by offering critiques of each other's religion, it is to encourage each party involved to return to and participate in their own religious reality through a process of examining the discrepancies in that reality and the way it is expressed. Socrates considered each party returning to their true self to be the goal of dialogue, and interreligious dialogue must also make this its aim. The true purpose of interreligious dialogue is for each to become aware of the divide between their theology and their religious reality, and discarding the distortions of their theology, awaken more fully to their own

religious reality. Put in a somewhat Buddhist way, each religion awakening to its own religious reality in this way will give rise to a deep sense of impartiality or equality—this is what Van Bragt sought to express by engaging in interreligious dialogue.

He had a deep interest in Nishitani's philosophy on emptiness but in the end was unable to fully reconcile his differences. And on this point, his reaction largely matches that of many Christian theologians in the West to the concept of emptiness. But, we need here to point out exactly where Van Bragt's contentions with the concept of emptiness lay. His resistance was based on the understanding of certain Buddhist scholars and Christian theologians who interpreted the concept of emptiness in an ontological and speculative philosophical manner as a nothingness in contrast to the concept of being in Christianity. As long as one understands the concept of emptiness in an ontological manner, one is in danger of applying to Buddhism the same concept—although this time simply the reverse—of being that did so much damage to Christianity. If understood simply in terms of logic, the concept of emptiness, although a negation of the concept of being, still cannot transcend the framework of ontology. Therefore, emptiness must be understood not as a theoretical or logical concept, but as a practical concept.

Van Bragt believed that love forms the core of the reality of Christianity and admitted that behind love must be a sense of emptiness, as emptiness purifies love and opens up the realm of selflessness. He asserted that the violent characteristics that still linger on in Christianity's concept of God go against the idea of God as love and must be cleared away once and for all. Here, we can sense his deep sensitivity to his own religious reality. However, Van Bragt poignantly realized that what makes this purge possible is the concept of emptiness and not the concept of being. In this sense, love is essentially more deeply linked with emptiness than with the concept of being—thus love and emptiness must be understood to be the front and back of the same coin. Emptiness does not negate love, it purifies love. It is in this spirit that the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism should be deepened, by pursuing not the relation between being and nothingness, but the relationship between love and emptiness.

Contemplation forms the crux of the concept of emptiness. And it is the fundamental insight of Buddhism that a compassionate heart arises from deep contemplation. Dharmākara was able to become the Tathāgata Amitābha, the embodiment of compassion, as the result of his contemplation over a period of five *kalpas*. Therefore, if contemplation is the essence of emptiness, emptiness cannot be separated from love. But what is contemplation? We should be care-

ful to note that contemplation in Buddhism does not refer to the observation of nature, but instead denotes the contemplation of the desires of all sentient beings, which includes both nature and human beings.

We should point out that the environment Van Bragt chose for fostering interreligious dialogue was one created by the religious philosophy of the Kyoto school. He intuitively sensed that the philosophy of emptiness that characterizes the Kyoto school offered an ideal space of selflessness that could embrace different religions. Thus in actuality, we could say that he was practicing the philosophy of emptiness.

Indeed, Van Bragt's character was the embodiment of the spirit of equality. He had an unaffected manner and looked equally upon all. As he had little concern for one's position on the social scale, all people who met him felt a sense of freedom that no doubt allowed them to take an honest look at themselves. He interacted with people the same, regardless of whether they were well known or not. He did not seek recognition for his achievements and at times even let others take credit for what was rightly his. He had no desire to stand out from others and truly was the embodiment of the spirit of dialogue. I feel an infinite sense of sadness at the passing of such an inimitable man, a source of light for his fellow human beings.

Hase Shōtō
(Translation by Adam Catt)